

III. STANDARD OF ETHICS FOR HOMELESS PROVIDERS

There was once a struggle to find an appropriate word to describe persons staying in homeless shelters: should they be "residents," "occupants," "inmates," or even, looking at it the way the medical profession does, "beds"? These were all quickly rejected: "residents" implying a sort of caged powerlessness, "occupants" a kind of ironical vacancy, "inmates" involuntary restraint, and "beds" so dehumanizing that only some mental health professionals and a few hospital administrators would be able to say it with a straight face.

Yet, what word is there, of the many words available, that can be used to describe persons in homeless shelters? There doesn't seem to be a fitting word - because there shouldn't be homeless persons. Homelessness and poverty in the U.S. are conditions that should have been eradicated long ago. It seems futile to search for dignified words to describe the situation homeless people are in.

The most fitting word found, ultimately, was "guest." This had the advantage of reminding us that sheltered homeless persons have as many rights and responsibilities as persons staying in hotels and motels and it carries the suggestion that in cases where the guest and the administrator see things differently, the dignity of the guest will always be respected; his or her rights, where ever possible, will be given the benefit of the doubt.

But sometimes, in the hustle and the bustle of operating what are generally under-funded, understaffed programs, language makes little difference. The positive connotation of the word guest can be overlooked, as both guests and staff try to deal with stressful situations. It is for this reason that a committee has been working throughout the winter of 1991-92 to develop this professional code of conduct and ethics for homeless providers.

The following pages are the result of this committee's work. This document is our best effort as concerned and compassionate individuals working within larger agencies. We offer it to the public, fully realizing it is not a legal document. Our hopes are that it provides a standard by which individual homeless agencies may view themselves and provide a critique and self-evaluation, with the end result being the improvement of services to guests, whose best interests are at the forefront of every action.

1. PURPOSE OF ETHICAL CODE:

- A. The code provides a consistent standard of service for all workers serving homeless people. It is not intended to be a standard of conduct for the persons served.
 - 1. The code defines a profile of service that is humane, compassionate, energetic, efficient, and caring.
 - 2. The code affirms that agency policy is created to meet the need of the guest/client, and that all policies will be created in the guest's/client's best interest.
 - 3. The code establishes guidelines for unconditional professionalism.
- B. The code provides a consistent gauge by which providers may refuse services to guests/clients.
- C. The code applies to all service providers serving this population.

2. GENERAL ETHICAL PRINCIPLES: The following ethical principles are ideals to strive for. Their goal is individual empowerment through the creation of more positive choices.

- A. Interaction between employees and guests/clients will always be with dignity, mutual respect, courtesy, and fairness.
- B. Guests/clients are not to be blamed for their situation.
- C. Guests/clients are to be regarded as self-determined and their choices will be respected by workers. Providers will do their best to inform guests of outcomes of those choices.
- D. Workers (and guests/clients) will strive to create additional alternatives when the given choices do not meet guests'/clients' needs.
- E. Individuals have the inherent right to privacy and confidentiality.
 - 1. Specific focus on privacy (intended for or restricted to the use of a particular person: *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield, Mass., 1981) and confidentiality (containing information whose unauthorized disclosure could be prejudicial to the interested party: *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield, Mass., 1981) will be placed upon the relationship between the caseworker and the guest/client throughout all phases of the casework relationship.
- F. Individuals have the inherent right to decent housing, adequate food, clothing, and safe sanitary conditions.
- G. Buildings will be accessible to persons with disabilities.
- H. Individuals have the right to pursue an education.
- I. Individuals with special dietary needs should have those needs met.

3. **GUEST RIGHTS AND POLICY ENDORSEMENT/AWARENESS:**

- A. Consistent utilization of policies and procedures ensures fairness.
 - 1. An explicit contract is required between the agency and guest/client explaining what is expected of each. That is, rules of each agency will be given to the client/guests with the outcomes specified for particular behaviors.
 - 2. Guests will receive a copy of the Standard of Ethics. They will be informed that it governs agency actions and possible outcomes of their own actions.
- B. Grievance procedures are required at each agency.
 - 1. This grievance procedure is not to be used as a bureaucratic barrier by an agency.
 - 2. This grievance procedure is not to be used by guests for individual gain or as a device to disrupt the normal functioning of an agency.
 - 3. There are three levels of grievance: agency, county, and state.
 - a. Agency Grievance Procedure -- Each agency should have its own grievance procedure which may involve peer guest review, staff review, staff and guest review, and board of directors review. A copy of this procedure

should be on file with the State Homeless Coordinating Committee.

- b. County Grievance Procedure -- Each County Homeless Coordinating Committee shall have a grievance committee to be available to people who are dissatisfied with the individual agency grievance procedure. Guests may submit a written description of the grieved decision to the appropriate County Homeless Coordinating Committee.

- (1) In Salt Lake County, the Chair is Jeff St. Romain, Volunteers of America, 455 E. 400 S., Salt Lake City, Utah 84111. Phone 363-9414.
- (2) In Utah County the staffer is Bill Hulterstrom, Director, United Way, P.O. Box 135, Provo, Utah 84603.
- (3) In Weber County the Chair is Matt Minkevitch, Catholic Community Services, 622 23rd Street, Ogden, Utah 84401. Phone 394-5947.
- (4) For the rest of the counties of the state the chair is the chairman of the State Homeless Coordinating Committee, c/o Kerry William Bate, SCSD Administrator, State of Utah, Division of Community Development Services, 324 South State Street, Salt Lake City, Utah 84114-7930.

- 4. The grievance will be presented to the appointed county grievance sub-committee, at a meeting scheduled no later than five (5) working days after submission. The grieving party must be present at the committee's meeting. A written decision will be given to the grieving party within 48 hours or two working days after the meeting. The decision of the county committee may be appealed in writing to the Chair of the State Homeless Coordinating Committee, whose decision is final. Meetings will include all parties involved in the grievance issue, and all information available. Decisions will be made through a vote, and will require a quorum of members of the committee hearing the appeal.

4. **PERMANENT BANNING:**

- A. Guests/clients may not be permanently banned from agency services.
 - 1. When the decision is made to withhold services, a written justification for this decision should be made in the guest's/client's file. The guest/client shall be informed of the reason for withholding services.

2. Guests/clients may not be permanently denied services, but rather given an alternative course of action which, if chosen, would again make them eligible for services. E.g.: "At this time we will not provide you with shelter because you refuse to seek drug and alcohol treatment, however, if you agree to complete treatment you will again be eligible to enter the shelter."
3. Denial of services will always be accompanied by a finite timeline. This timeline will be situationally defined by the case worker and guest/client. (i.e.: "Guest's request for services will be reconsidered after two (X) months from denial date.")

5. **REFERRALS:**

- A. Recipients of housing funds from the State of Utah Department of Community and Economic Development may refer clients to other agencies **only** after giving consideration to guest's/client's wishes. Both referring and receiving agencies must be in agreement about the proposed referral.
- B. Full and honest disclosure of reasons for referral and guest/client condition must be made at the time of referral.
- C. Arrangements for travel and shelter are the responsibility of the referring agency and will give consideration to the guests'/clients' best interests.
- D. Referral arrangements will be in writing whenever possible.
- E. If no services are available from referring agency, then every effort should be made to find appropriate services elsewhere.

6. **INTER-AGENCY INTERACTION:**

- A. This code demands a collaborative effort from every homeless provider in the state.
 1. Agencies are strongly encouraged to participate in coordinating meetings at all levels.
 2. Agencies are strongly encouraged to be aware of other agencies' policies on common issues.
 3. Agencies are strongly encouraged to provide a forum for discussion of problem/grievance/ethical considerations.

7. **AGENCY RESPONSIBILITIES:**

- A. The overall goal of each agency is the eradication of poverty.
- B. A standard for staff is recommended, which requires:
 1. A minimum appropriate level of education/experience fitting to the position;
 2. Adequate/effective/competent communication skills;
 3. Commitment to working with poverty populations with empathy and understanding.

4. A commitment to professional conduct.

8. **AGENCY RESPONSIBILITIES TOWARD EMPLOYEES:**

- A. Agency will provide employees with all information about its Ethical Standard.
 1. Information will be given both verbally and in writing.
 2. Written information will be acknowledged by employees by their signing of the document, with notation of difficulties (if any) written onto the signed document.
 3. Signed document will be kept in permanent employee file.
- B. Ongoing training will be provided by the agency for all employees as resources allow.
 1. Training will be provided in a timely fashion, utilizing up to date information.
 2. It is the staff responsibility to be aware of their training needs and to voice these needs to their supervisors.
- C. Agency will provide for each employee, to the best of the agency's ability:
 1. At least a poverty level wage (in Utah this is at least \$6.00 an hour for a family of three with one source of income);
 2. Health Care (pro rated for employees working part time);
 3. A commitment in words and actions to support employee efforts to obtain housing.
 4. Agencies will attempt to eradicate poverty by supporting increased wages, accessibility to health care, and the amount of affordable housing available to low income persons. These actions will be done on all levels through a variety of rigorous and creative methods.

9. **AGENCY'S RESPONSIBILITY TO DEVELOP AND POST POLICIES:**

- A. Each agency should develop its own Code of Ethics, based upon the DCDS Standard of Ethics.
 1. Development of this Code of Ethics will be done with the intent to provide the best available services to guests and to collaborate with other social service agencies in the state.
 2. Development of the Code will involve guests, staff, board of directors, community leaders, and volunteers.

- B. Posting of the Code should begin immediately upon acceptance of the code of ethics by the governing body and involved persons of each agency.
1. The Code of Ethics will be posted in a public place (e.g. the lobby of the agency) and made available to all interested parties.
 2. Policy will also be in the organizations files, by-laws, etc.
 3. A Code of Ethics of the agency will be mailed to the State Homeless Coordinating Committee chairman, 324 South State St., Salt Lake City, Utah 84114-7930.

This Standard of Ethics was created through the collaboration of the following people and agencies:

Catholic Community Services

Mona Knapp
Jolene Cassingham

Department of Community & Economic Development

Kerry Bate
Sherie Brinkerhoff
Dan DeGooyer Jr.

Utah County Food & Shelter Coalition

Marilee Shelton
Lee Stearn

Salt Lake Community Action Program

Sharon Abegglen
Kim Spradlin

Richfield Housing Authority

Rita Cox

Southeastern Utah Association of Governments

Nancy Bentley

St. Anne's Center

Chuck Rotkowski

Utah Issues

Bill Crim

Travelers Aid Peer Support Alliance (P.S.A.)

Julie Shepherd
Lumi Bradford
John Madsen
Peer Support Alliance Members

Travelers Aid Society

Donna Gebler
Linda Hulme
Patrick Poulon
Larry Witherow

Adopted 24 April 1992 in St. George, Utah, at the Annual Meeting of the Utah Chapter of the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO) at a session titled, "Development of an Ethic for Homeless Providers."